

**STENNIS SPACE CENTER
HISTORY PROJECT**

**THE MISSISSIPPI ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
of
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI**

An Oral History

with

Mr. William R. Matkin

**Volume 393
1991**

Interviewer: Dr. Charles Bolton

Copyright
University of Southern Mississippi
1992

This transcription of an oral history by the Mississippi Oral History Program of the University of Southern Mississippi may not be reproduced or published in any form except that quotation of short excerpts of unrestricted transcripts and the associated tape recordings is permissible providing written consent is obtained from the Mississippi Oral History Committee, Box 5175, Southern Station, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 39406. In those instances where literary rights have been retained by the interviewee, written permission must be obtained from both the Mississippi Oral History Program and the interviewee.

The Mississippi Oral History Program is under the policy direction of the Oral History Committee comprised of the following persons:

Dr. Aubrey K. Lucas

Dr. Ray Skates

Dr. William D. McCain

Dr. John Gonzales

Dr. G. David Huffman

Dr. Glenn T. Harper

Dr. Robert T. van Aller

Dr. Neil McMillen

Dr. Kenneth G. McCarty

Dr. Charles Bolton, Program Director

Charles Bolton, Interviewer

Amendia Shoemake-Netto, Editor

Shelby Mayfield, Typist

Biography

Mr. William R. Matkin was born in Delta County, Texas, on February 24, 1926, to Virgil B. Matkin and Dollie Deason Matkin. In 1936 his family moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where Mr. Matkin lived until he was a young man. He completed high school and joined the U.S. Air Force in 1944. Following two years of military service, he continued his education at a commercial college at Tyler, Texas.

In 1948 Mr. Matkin joined the Civil Aeronautics Administration as an Airways Operations Specialist and Air Traffic Controller. He continued in this position until 1956, when he moved to Pass Christian, Mississippi, to work with an independent oil company. When plans for the construction of the Mississippi Test Facility were announced in October 1961, Mr. Matkin applied with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and accepted a job in land acquisitions.

The Real Estate Project Office for the MTF was established in Bay St. Louis in February 1962. During the years that it was in operation, Mr. Matkin negotiated the purchase of lands on which the facility was to be constructed and the purchase/lease of lands in the buffer zone around the test site. After the closing of the Bay St. Louis office in June 1968, Mr. Matkin transferred to the Corps of Engineers Mobile office and worked in the department of real estate management and disposal until his retirement in May 1991.

Mr. Matkin is married to the former Laurie Paul Stephens of Coushatta, Louisiana, and they have two children: William R. Matkin, Jr. and Edwina Diane Gallagher. Mr. Matkin and his wife currently reside in Pass Christian and are members of Trinity Episcopal Church.

AN ORAL HISTORY

with

MR. WILLIAM R. MATKIN

This is an interview for the Stennis Space Center History Project in conjunction with The University of Southern Mississippi. The interview is being conducted with Mr. Bill Matkin and is being recorded at the Stennis Space Center on December 4, 1991. The interviewer is Dr. Charles Bolton.

Dr. Bolton: First of all, let me thank you, Mr. Matkin, for taking the time this morning to talk to us on behalf of the Stennis Space Center History Project and The University of Southern Mississippi.

Mr. Matkin: Thank you. I appreciate being asked to participate.

Dr. Bolton: Let me start off with when and where were you born?

Mr. Matkin: I was born in Delta County, Texas, February 24, 1926.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. Also, could you give us a little bit of background information about your life, as much as you feel is necessary up to the time you began to work for the Corps of Engineers? Maybe something about your education, if you were in the military, anything that you think might be pertinent.

Mr. Matkin: My early life was spent in East Texas and my family moved to Ft. Worth when I was about ten years of age. I completed my high school education in Ft. Worth and joined the U.S. Air Force in 1944. Upon being discharged from the military in 1946, I completed a course at a commercial college in Tyler, Texas. In 1948 I joined the Civil Aeronautics Administration and served at Tyler, Texas, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as an Airways Operations Specialist and Air Traffic Controller.

In January 1956 I moved to Pass Christian, Mississippi, where I was employed in the land department of an independent oil company. I worked in the oil business until the announcement of the Stennis Space Center was made on October 26, 1961. I immediately applied to the agency that would be responsible for the acquisition of the land and was subsequently employed by the Mobile District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. I was assigned to the Real Estate Project Office in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, which was being set up for the land acquisition project.

Dr. Bolton: So they had a branch office in Bay St. Louis that they established?

Mr. Matkin: What they call a Real Estate Project Office for the acquisition of lands for what was then known as the Mississippi Test Operations, I believe.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. You would have come in when, I guess, the original communities were still here in this area where the space facility is now. What do you remember about those communities, as you saw them when you first came in?

Mr. Matkin: Although I had lived on the Gulf Coast within a thirty-mile distance of these communities for the past seven years, I didn't know some of them existed. The little community of Gainesville was off the beaten path.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Matkin: Westonia, which is just up the road to the north, and Logtown, which is just south of Gainesville on the river. I was not familiar with these communities, although I later learned that they have much, much historical background.

These communities were virtually untouched when we first came in. No one had changed anything. I often said when I went to Logtown that no matter what day of the week it was, it always felt like Sunday to me. Everything was very peaceful, the oak trees with the long moss and the old homes in that area. You drive down that drive, the tree-shaded street down to the river, there was something about it that gave me the impression that it shouldn't have been disturbed. [laughter]

Dr. Bolton: When you say untouched, you mean it seemed to be still in the nineteenth century or something like that?

Mr. Matkin: It had the aspects of an old, old community that progress hadn't disturbed too much.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: That's not a derogatory statement, but an attempt to describe the unique, tranquil atmosphere of the area.

Dr. Bolton: Were there some individuals that stood out in the communities as you came to know them a little bit better? That just may have-

Mr. Matkin: Oh, yes. You are pulling on my memory from thirty years ago. [laughter] Mrs. Lovelace at the grocery store at Gainesville. That was sort of a focal point in the community. At least that was the perception that I received. If you wanted to know something about what was going on or where you might find somebody-I think we may have driven Mrs. Lovelace crazy at times, using her as an information point. She and her husband ran the store just at the end of the lower Gainesville road where it runs into the river there. If you wanted to see someone, just hang around that store awhile and sooner or later they would come in there. It was quite interesting.

Then of course, there were other people. An elderly lady, and as I recall her name was Mary Whitney. She was about ninety, ninety-one years old. She lived with, as I recall, a widowed daughter whose name I don't recall at the moment. But when we called on her she had explained to us that she had been brought to this area many years ago as a bride from Alabama, I believe, to a log cabin which was still standing across the highway. It was quite deteriorated but still standing. I think she said she was a bride of sixteen or eighteen. A very charming lady. She made quite an impression on me. She was almost totally blind, but I'd come to the door and she would recognize my voice. I always took time to chat with her because she was so pleasant. She had such a great outlook for a person of her age and with her infirmities.

Dr. Bolton: In the office that you worked in, how did they go about notifying people that they were going to have to leave their land or give the government a permanent easement if they were in the buffer zone?

Mr. Matkin: The method used to notify everyone was by the filing of a legal instrument in the land records of Hancock and Pearl River Counties, Mississippi, and in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. These were done simultaneously by the U.S. Attorney's office on October 26, 1961. It stated in there the rights that the government would be acquiring and a description of the land on which these rights would be acquired. This was to give everyone notice at the same time of what was getting ready to happen.

Dr. Bolton: So it was an official notice on the day the announcement came out.

Mr. Matkin: The official notice was given by the filing of these papers and that's how I found out about the project. I was not that familiar with the Corps of Engineers. I had had some small dealings with them prior to that time. With my oil lease acquisitions background, the oil business was sort of in the doldrums at the time, I immediately went to the Corps office in Mobile, Alabama, and applied for a job acquiring lands for the project. That's how I became involved with the Corps of Engineers Real Estate Project Office set up in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, for the acquisition of the test site lands.

Dr. Bolton: How far along was that office with their work by the time that you joined them? February of '62, is that-

Mr. Matkin: The Corps of Engineers, of course, knew about the project long before the public announcement. The Corps' Mobile office accomplished much preliminary work that was necessary in order to obtain the funding for the project through the Congress. Legal descriptions of the perimeter of the construction area to be acquired in fee simple and the buffer zone area were prepared. Also, one of the Corps of Engineers staff appraisers prepared a very confidential gross appraisal of the entire site which contained an estimate of the total cost of the land acquisition effort. In other words how much money is it going to take to acquire these rights and these properties. All of this took place prior to the public announcement.

Subsequent to that, there was not much work that took place prior to February 1962. They were still moving furniture in when I joined the group. There was some work on the ground towards writing descriptions of individual tracts. But that progressed slowly and it _was some time later that we contacted our first landowner with an offer to purchase.

Dr. Bolton: You said there was a confidential appraisal. Someone would go in and the townspeople wouldn't know he was appraising their land?

Mr. Matkin: He didn't go in and appraise individual tracts at this time.

Dr. Bolton: I see.

Mr. Matkin: He took the thirteen thousand, five hundred acres that were to be acquired in fee and then the surrounding area that was to be acquired for the buffer zone, the approximate number of families that lived in the area, businesses, churches, schools, and this type of thing and came up with what resulted in a gross appraisal of the area for funding purposes. Then later we came back and

individual appraisals were prepared on each tract of land by independent appraisers under contract with the Corps of Engineers. The owner was notified prior to the appraiser commencing his work and invited to accompany the appraiser during his inspection of the property in each case.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. I guess as early as February of '62, probably, the people in the communities were still coming up with their initial responses to the announcement. How did you view their initial response to finding out that they were going to be moved to make way for this facility?

Mr. Matkin: Well, of course, the big question was, "How much?"

Dr. Bolton: "How much money?"

Mr. Matkin: "How much money?" A lot of them just didn't want to leave. Certainly I can understand that. Some of these people were born and raised right here in this area, maybe in the same house. As I said before, it was a beautiful area. I think any time anyone is uprooted from his origin it's traumatic. It has to be.

I think there was fear of the unknown as to what was going to happen. I think with the announcement, on the outside of the periphery of the facility, speculators immediately moved in buying up lands for resale because this was a tremendous project coming to town. New homes were going to be built. So prices began to rise immediately, unlike what we were allowed to pay for the lands that we were taking. As it turned out, the comparable sales that were used in establishing the value of the lands that we were taking were frozen as of October 26, 1961. We were not allowed to use sales that took place on lands outside the buffer zone after that date. Of course, there was little or no private sales activity within the project area after the public announcement.

Dr. Bolton: So you were basing the prices that you were offering on prices before the announcement, but you are saying that land prices rose after the announcement was made.

Mr. Matkin: Oh, outside the buffer zone absolutely, because speculators moved in. There was a precedent in law that project enhancement did not increase the value of the land. In other words the impact of the project moving into the area could not be taken into consideration in establishing the value of the land to be taken.

Dr. Bolton: But I guess some of the landowners thought that that should be taken into account?

Mr. Matkin: Oh, absolutely. I can understand their reasoning there.

Dr. Bolton: Right, right. Did the Corps of Engineers take any steps, hold meetings or anything to try to reassure landowners about this process or to inform them how you would go about carrying out the acquisition of the land?

Mr. Matkin: Yes. The Corps of Engineers prepared a very detailed booklet outlining the acquisition process and this was widely distributed to all interested parties. Also, there was one particular meeting at which I was not in attendance. I'm not sure of the date. I heard about it many, many times afterwards as to what was said at the meeting. Some of it was true and some of it wasn't. There was a meeting at Logtown, Mississippi.

Dr. Bolton: Is that the one that Senator Stennis was at?

Mr. Matkin: Senator Stennis, I think, spoke from the back of a truck. I wish I had a recording of all the things I was later told that he purportedly promised these people. Actually, some of it was true and some wasn't.

The real truth of the matter, I think, was that what was said was the people would be treated fairly and that we were allowed to pay the fair market value. And that's how it wound up. The fair market value being the value that a willing seller would sell to a willing buyer, both having full knowledge of all the facts, and neither being compelled to act. That's where we tried to wind up. I don't say that we always did it, but that was our goal.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. How many tracts of individual land were there to acquire to make way for this [facility]?

Mr. Matkin: My recollection is—and there are statistics somewhere that you can get this—but there were around thirty-four or thirty-five hundred individual tracts. Now, when I say individual tracts, International Paper Company owned a lot of land out here. If it was not a contiguous tract we gave it a separate tract number.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: In other words, International Paper Company may have owned ten or fifteen separate tracts of land. In other cases a husband and wife may own the homestead, and they owned another tract of land elsewhere which was only in the husband's name. They were given two different tract numbers.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, okay.

Mr. Matkin: That was a lot of different individuals we had to contact.

Dr. Bolton: Maybe you could just explain step-by-step how you would go about acquiring one of these tracts. You mentioned first that an appraiser would go out with the landowner.

Mr. Matkin: Let's back up just a minute.

Dr. Bolton: Okay, how would you go from the start to the end?

Mr. Matkin: Prior to the October 26th announcement, much work had been done on this project. Although I was not involved in it, this is what I learned later. For instance, the boundary had been established.

Dr. Bolton: Of the whole facility?

Mr. Matkin: Of the entire site. And to my knowledge, after that October 26th date, that boundary of the buffer zone was never changed. It was established on that date, and although there was much pressure in some instances, "move it just so you don't get me," that boundary was never changed. The theory was—and I thought it was a good one—that if you change it in one place, you are going to have to change it somewhere else, too, for somebody else. So you just

can't go—

Dr. Bolton: Just drew the line and let it fall where it may.

Mr. Matkin: Drew the line and that stayed that way. From that point when our office was established in Bay St. Louis, we had people who would go out on the ground with deeds from the courthouse, check the boundaries of the two property owners to be sure that they were in agreement as to the boundary between them, and establish all this tract ownership data, then came back and wrote a description.

Dr. Bolton: Did they find a lot of discrepancies?

Mr. Matkin: Oh, there were many discrepancies. There were a lot of discrepancies in the courthouse records themselves. I don't mean in the record keeping, but in tax records for instance, there were a lot of tracts that had been sold for taxes that didn't exist. For instance, there are a lot of irregular sections in this part of the country. By that I mean sections that do not contain the usual six hundred and forty acres. Say, a section showed up with only five hundred acres; somewhere along the line there was the possibility that someone had sold for taxes the hundred and forty acres that should have been in a six-hundred-and-forty-acre section. The hundred and forty acres didn't exist. Those people who had bought those lands at a tax sale and paid taxes on it for some years were hard to convince that it didn't exist. That wasn't a usual case; that's an unusual situation. I think their money was ultimately refunded. Unique situations.

Of course, there were title problems. People had inherited land and never bothered to go through the process of probating a will or succession procedure.

Dr. Bolton: So all that had to be cleared up first.

Mr. Matkin: All that had to be cleared before—sometimes we were not successful in being able to clear a title, in which case we would condemn it. We may reach an agreement as to value with the landowner, but have to condemn it to acquire a good title. Then they would have to go through the court system to give the government a good title. A legal notice of the taking would be published, and anyone claiming an interest would have the opportunity to appear and make their claim.

Dr. Bolton: So you got that, that was the first step is making sure that all—

Mr. Matkin: That was the first step, to write the description.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: Once we had a description, we entered into contracts with private appraisers. They weren't employees of the Corps of Engineers. There were some from the local area. We used as many from the local area as we could. There were several from Jackson, one from Hattiesburg, I think one from Laurel. Several from various places. Some from New Orleans [or] Covington, Louisiana, for the Louisiana portion of it. We would enter into contracts with these people to do the appraisal on the individual tracts. They, upon completion of that appraisal, would turn it into the Corps of Engineers. The Corps maintained a staff of appraisers called reviewing appraisers. They would take the appraisal and review it, based on the knowledge that they had gained from experience of the overall area, as to its consistency with other values in the area and consistency with values established for

certain building costs and the highest and best use of the property being appraised. If there was a difference of opinion by the Corps of Engineers and the contract appraiser, they went back and discussed it with them. The contract appraiser was never forced to change an appraisal, but after these discussions the contract appraiser was free to change it or modify it or leave it as it was. If the Corps still did not agree with it, either too high or too low, they would obtain another contract appraisal. If it came out the same way then possibly they were right the first time. In my opinion we made every effort to come up with what was fair and reasonable.

Dr. Bolton: Could a landowner get his own independent appraisal?

Mr. Matkin: Absolutely, and quite often did.

Dr. Bolton: How would that be taken into account as far as determining the value? Say if they had a different value attached to the land than—

Mr. Matkin: We would discuss individual elements of an appraisal as to land value and how we arrived at it, comparable sales that were used, and how they compared to the land being acquired. However, we were prohibited from ever divulging or showing our appraisal to anyone, a landowner, their attorney or anyone else. The only time they had actual access to our appraisal was if it went to court. Then the appraiser who actually did the work would get on the stand and testify exactly how he arrived at his conclusions. I guess I negotiated more tracts than any other individual negotiator, and I tried to give the people sufficient information on how we arrived at the value so that they could make their own decision as to whether we were right or wrong. I was always very cautious and told people, "If you don't think we are right, don't accept it because you will never feel good about it. Go to court and let the court establish the value. That's not something that you should be intimidated by." And that is what the court is for, to make these decisions when people don't see things eye-to-eye.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Matkin: We wound up buying a large percentage by direct purchase and as I recall, approximately six hundred tracts wound up in court. That's slightly better than what the Corps of Engineers had experienced nationally. Seventy-five percent, I think, is what they had been running. Mind you, some of those tracts that went to court was simply because of title. We had agreed on value.

Dr. Bolton: You had to get the clear title.

Mr. Matkin: Yes, and in a few cases we simply couldn't locate the landowner and some of them were tracts that had gone to the state for non-payment of taxes. No one else bought them. And there was no law which allowed us to acquire those tracts from the state. So we had to condemn those. But most of the tracts were condemned because of a dispute as to value.

Dr. Bolton: After you would get this appraisal, then you would make an offer to the landowner? Is that how it would work?

Mr. Matkin: We had an appraisal and we contracted with a title company to furnish us with a title certificate on each tract of land. This preliminary title certificate would come back to us showing what had to be done in order for that individual to convey a good title to the government. It may be an affidavit of heirship, simply stating that the record title owner had died,

[and] who his heirs were who now would be able to convey that tract of land. Various other types of discrepancies in the title. After that was done we would then contact the landowner and enter into realistic negotiations. We were not allowed to divulge the exact amount of the appraisal at any time. We tried to solicit from the landowners an opening offer in every case.

Dr. Bolton: You let them make the first offer? [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: Yes, we gave them the opportunity, however, that very, very seldom was successful. [laughter] They just felt that the government should make the first offer since they were not willing sellers, and this was understandable.

Dr. Bolton: Sure.

Mr. Matkin: But nevertheless that was our procedure.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: Then we would make an opening offer. Sometimes negotiations would run for several months if you were making progress. If it came to the point that you were no longer making progress, then my position was to try to get the people to agree to go to court and settle it. Then you've reached an agreement. It may have been an agreement to disagree, but you've reached an agreement. As I said, I encouraged them, "If you don't agree with what we are offering you, go to court. Don't be intimidated by the system."

Dr. Bolton: So the opening offer that the Corps would make would be based on the appraisal.

Mr. Matkin: It would be based on the appraisal.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: Right. Now, at that time there were no restrictions. No statutory restrictions on what you offered the people. The appraisal is not an exact science.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Matkin: It is an opinion, an expert's opinion. And experts disagree quite often.

Now, I think, in the acquisition of private lands by the Corps of Engineers, you have to make the offer in writing and it has to be equal to the appraisal. Now, I'm not implying that when we did our project here that we tried to undercut these people, because that wasn't our purpose.

Dr. Bolton: Okay, so it was generally very close to the appraisal?

Mr. Matkin: Right. Correct, that's correct.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: And most often we wound up settling something over the appraisal.

Dr. Bolton: When you got into the negotiations.

Mr. Matkin: Yes. Most often—

Dr. Bolton: You were willing to give a little.

Mr. Matkin: Seldom did we buy one on the exact amount of the appraisal.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. What about the buffer zone, how important was that? Were there problems negotiating with people in the buffer zone?

Mr. Matkin: That was a little more difficult.

Dr. Bolton: How did you explain to them the importance of the buffer zone when you were negotiating with them?

Mr. Matkin: Well, of course, the damage that might occur to buildings located in the buffer zone was by reason of the low-frequency sound vibrations, as it was explained to me, that may be set up by the firings. These vibrations, as I understood it, may focus off of cloud layers or some other strata in the atmosphere back down on a particular area, causing things to either crack, deteriorate, something to walk off of a shelf and bounce on somebody's head, or various types of activity that may result in damage claims. This is the only way you could explain it.

When we originally started, our authority was to acquire only a perpetual restrictive easement, to prohibit the construction of any dwellings or other buildings susceptible—and that's the key word—susceptible of being used for human habitation or human occupancy. We construed that to mean anything with walls and a roof that a human could get in. Susceptible to being occupied by a human. Barns had to go, anything.

I think we had a rice farm over in the eastern section of the buffer zone that had some large metal rice bins, that had a door to them.

Dr. Bolton: So that would qualify.

Mr. Matkin: When contacted by the negotiator, the landowner asked, "Do I have to move the rice bins?" And he said, "Can they be occupied by a human?" And the response was, "Yes, I know some people in south Louisiana who are living in one." And that's understandable, too, because the things were larger than this room, with a door on them, and the auger had been removed from the center of it. So the response was then, "It must be removed." That was an unusual case and we only had one rice farm, thank goodness.

Dr. Bolton: Did the government ever consider buying that land outright instead of going the perpetual easement route.

Mr. Matkin: Yes, we considered it very strongly as a matter of fact. We were forced to consider it. Not long-and I don't know the exact date—after we commenced negotiations for tracts in the buffer zone, which would probably be the fall of '62. I think our deadline for acquiring the fee area was July 31, 1962. We may have extended that by thirty days or so.

So we then started in the buffer zone, and it didn't take us long to realize that we were leaving a lot of people with an uneconomical tract of land that they would do nothing but pay taxes on it. And of course the people were protesting. For instance, the owner of a two-acre home site would have to move his house off; he couldn't grow trees, he couldn't farm it, he couldn't do anything with it. All he could do would be to pay taxes. So it wasn't too long after we started—and I don't remember exactly when we did change the policy—the policy was changed to provide that when the appraised value of the easement was a substantial portion of the value of buying it outright, we gave the landowner an option. He could sell us the fee or he could sell us an easement.

Let me give you an example of how we arrived at the easement value. The appraiser would use the "before" and "after" value method. In other words, he would arrive at an estimate of the fee value of the property without the easement imposed and would then establish an estimate of the value of the property after all of the restrictions of the easement had been imposed. The resulting difference in the "before" and "after" value would be the appraiser's estimate of the easement value. For instance, a two-acre homesite worth, say, three thousand dollars before imposition of the easement would be reduced to \$65.00 per acre timberland value, its highest and best use after imposition of the easement. Therefore the resulting difference of \$28.70 would be the value of the easement.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Matkin: So in cases like the example I just cited where the value of the easement was a substantial portion of the value of the fee or outright purchase, the landowner was given the opportunity to sell outright and we paid the full fee value for it.

Dr. Bolton: So in the buffer zone then, there are some areas that are owned outright by the government and some that are subject to a perpetual easement.

Mr. Matkin: That's correct. Now, if the highest and best use of the property was timberland before and timberland afterward, those people didn't get that option.

There were numerous large tracts, three hundred acres or more, that didn't get the option. It was a viable timber unit before and after the imposition of the easement the value was not greatly diminished.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. You said that there were more problems acquiring the buffer zone property or getting the rights to it than the fee area. Do you remember any tracts that particularly stand out in your memory that were problems acquiring in the buffer zone? [laughter] Or acquiring the rights at least.

Mr. Matkin: [Laughter] Well, there were some that resisted more than others. I'm reluctant to start singling out people.

Dr. Bolton: Maybe we can do it anonymously, without mentioning their names. [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: We had one very large tract which had some great amenities, river frontage with many improvements. One of the first tracts, by the way, that we tried in court before a jury. Got a verdict that wasn't very favorable to the landowner. It was within our range. The landowner appealed and the case came back for a new trial. By this time the court, with presiding Judge Harold Cox, Southern District of Mississippi, sitting in Biloxi, had tried maybe a dozen of these cases. And it had become

very obvious that there were many inconsistencies in the way different juries saw this thing.

The way the court worked was that two juries would be selected from a large panel of jurors. Once they had the two juries picked, they would proceed to try a case before the first jury. As soon as that jury had heard the case and went into deliberations, immediately the second jury would be placed in the box and we would start another case. We would set maybe a week of these. If the first jury that went out came to a decision, the ongoing trial would recess and they would come back in with their verdict, opinion as to value. They would give that verdict and then they would be dismissed until the second jury had heard their case and they went into deliberations.

I recall one week that we had two juries and one was giving very high verdicts and one was giving very low verdicts. There was nothing strange about it; it was just the way they saw it.

This I think was what prompted Judge Cox to go to the commission procedure. He appointed an eminent domain commission, which is authorized under the federal statutes, to hear these cases. The commission was chaired by an attorney, and two real estate people were the other two commissioners. By this he attained consistency in verdicts, because they heard all the evidence in all the cases. They became familiar with the overall general area and the numerous sales that had taken place and, I think, were allowed to take judicial knowledge of these sales whether they were actually presented or not. So this helped that situation tremendously, not only helped the consistency but expedited the cases. It was a little less formal than the jury procedure. A hell of a lot less expensive. We utilized one marshal where with a jury you had a bailiff, you had two or three marshalls in the courtroom, the judge, the judge's staff, and the jurors.

Dr. Bolton: More court cost.

Mr. Matkin: A tremendous amount of court cost. Also, I think the landowners had a little more freedom and were not as intimidated, sitting before the commission talking to these three gentlemen, as they were in the formal courtroom setting.

Dr. Bolton: Right.

Mr. Matkin: I was very pleased with the way that turned out. I think the landowners probably benefitted from that also. Although some of them, of course, I feel would disagree with that.

Dr. Bolton: [Laughter] They went to this commission system after only a dozen or so had been tried? Is that correct?

Mr. Matkin: That's my recollection, and I could be off on that a little bit.

Dr. Bolton: Let me turn this over; I'm about to run out of tape.

Editor's Note: At this time there was a brief interruption. The interview continues on Tape 1, Side 2.

Dr. Bolton: Just a couple more things about the buffer zone. I remember reading some articles about people who had things like fish camps out there. They also had to move, even though they wouldn't be living there permanently. Even if they were going to live there temporarily, say, a weekend a month or something, those buildings had to be removed if they were in the buffer

zone, right?

Mr. Matkin: All the buildings had to be removed.

Dr. Bolton: Okay, okay.

Mr. Matkin: The easement estate which the government acquired is a permissive right. For instance, I think it reads that the government has the "right to prohibit." If they wanted to grant a waiver they have that right, NASA can do that. Waivers have been granted to the state's truck weighing stations and in certain cases public utilities.

Dr. Bolton: So there are a few places that still exist in the buffer zone.

Mr. Matkin: Yes. Even today there are some private enterprises. NASA is very jealous of their rights to protect this buffer zone because to duplicate it today the cost would be astronomical. It's the only such facility in the country. They will grant a waiver in unusual cases, such as for buildings that are essential for the recovery of natural resources located in the buffer zone.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: And only buildings that are essential to the recovery. Oil drilling rigs with the accompanying tool house, for example.

Dr. Bolton: So the original landowner if they have just given up an easement they could come back and get the minerals out of the ground. They still own the mineral rights.

Mr. Matkin: Right. We did not acquire mineral interests in the buffer zone except when we acquired fee. And then only if the landowner wanted to sell the minerals. If he wanted to reserve them we allowed him to do that.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. Were there problems with holding on to the buffer zone easement and rights after the lunar landing was over? After people thought the main test had been done, did a lot of people think that the government should give back the buffer zone?

Mr. Matkin: Yes. [laughter]

Dr. Bolton: [Laughter] How did you deal with that?

Mr. Matkin: There have been several moves by individuals and groups and I think even the county board of supervisors has pursued on one or two occasions the possibility of relinquishing the buffer zone. NASA, of course, made these decisions. The Corps of Engineers only acted as their agent in enforcing them. NASA has always insisted that this buffer zone is essential to their operation.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. You've mentioned some of the resistance that people had to this and mainly it was about price. I'd noticed in reading through the articles that there was an organized resistance landowners group. Was that the main impetus behind the forming of that group? The problem over the price?

Mr. Matkin: That was the main impetus. They shut us down for a month or two. We had very little

success in negotiating anything there for a short period of time. I don't remember the name of the organization.

Dr. Bolton: I think it was Mississippi Test Operation Landowners Group or something like that.

Mr. Matkin: And the Picayune newspaper, *Picayune Item*, is that the name of it?

Dr. Bolton: That's right.

Mr. Matkin: I don't know the editor's name, and I should.

Dr. Bolton: Mr. Nutter?

Mr. Matkin: Nutter, Charles Nutter.

Dr. Bolton: I'm from Picayune, that's why I know. [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: Okay, Charles Nutter visited our office almost on a daily basis to obtain information as to transactions that had been completed the day before and published them.

Dr. Bolton: Yes, I noticed a lot of the articles from the *Item*.

Mr. Matkin: On a daily basis as to what had been acquired and how many acres and for what price. The organization, of course, wanted the answers to certain things. They were entitled to these. I think once that those answers were given, I don't know that they had any impact on the way we were appraising. I don't think it did really. Since I was not in the appraisal branch I can't actually say that, but I don't really think that it did.

Dr. Bolton: I noticed that they called on Senator Stennis and, I think, the governor at the time to come in and take their side on the issue. Did that kind of put pressure on your office, the fact that they would bring in, I guess, the big political guns? [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: Well, constantly during the entire process my personal position was if you are doing what you think is right you don't have anything to worry about. Certainly be truthful with people. Senator Stennis—whom I admire very much, I always have—was greatly interested in the progress of this project and kept up with it. He strolled into our office down there on several occasions unannounced. Always a gentleman. Not only Senator Stennis but some of the other congressional delegation kept up with what was going on. And yes, people did correspond and contact their congressional delegation. We tried to respond as factually as we could. If we were wrong we should admit it. If we were right or thought we were right that's what we should stick with.

Dr. Bolton: What happened to that group, do you know? Did they just—eventually their objections were answered and they just faded away or did there continue to be organized resistance as long as you were doing this? [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: They had a leader. I think once his property was acquired and he left the area, there were others who stepped in to fill his place. But it wasn't the same and I think the objections slacked off some. Whether we were doing a better job of telling the story or they felt that they were up

against a brick wall or could be they felt that they were getting better treatment; I don't know. But after the original leader departed the area, there was still some opposition and still the meetings that took place, and still we were called on to explain things in the general way. But the progress of negotiations picked up and we went on from there.

Dr. Bolton: Do you remember who that leader was or would you like to say? I'm sure it's in the records somewhere.

Mr. Matkin: His name was Fargarson; he was a retired doctor.

Dr. Bolton: I've heard the name.

Mr. Matkin: He lived up off Flattop Road. Had a farm, a cattle farm. Very nice gentleman. He retired to this area from south Louisiana.

Dr. Bolton: Would you go to the meetings personally?

Mr. Matkin: No, no.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. Who would go from the Corps? Nobody from the Corps?

Mr. Matkin: Yes, we would have people, if we were invited. Quite often they had meetings where we weren't invited. [laughter]

Dr. Bolton: Closed meetings. [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: Usually it would be someone from Mobile or even from Washington that would attend these meetings.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: The chief of the real estate division in the Mobile district. Maybe the district engineer.

Dr. Bolton: So they would send the top people to talk to these groups.

Mr. Matkin: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: You mentioned that the fee area was cleared. When were the fee area and the buffer zone finally cleared of human habitation? You mentioned a date earlier for the fee zone.

Mr. Matkin: My recollection is that the original target date was July 31, 1962. That was subsequently extended, I believe, by thirty days. That was so construction could begin. Construction was going to take two or three years, four years maybe. So the buffer zone could wait. So we acquired the fee area before we made any quotes in the buffer zone.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: Now, when I say acquired the fee area, we had taken title either by direct purchase or

by the filing of the eminent domain proceedings and the court giving title and possession to the government. The court would set a date for the landowner to vacate. As I recall it was July 31st, and was subsequently extended for 30 days through August 1962.

Dr. Bolton: Sometime in the summer of '62.

Mr. Matkin: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: What about the buffer zone? I know that was much later, but I guess that had to be cleared before the first testing.

Mr. Matkin: Before the first testing.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: And I don't remember what that date was.

Dr. Bolton: Okay, we can look that up. I just was unclear on when that was.

Mr. Matkin: I closed the office here in, I believe, June of '68.

Dr. Bolton: That would have been after all the transactions would have been completed?

Mr. Matkin: The first test had taken place, because I went from my office out to observe it. We still had a large backlog of court cases that we were working on. Still had some after I moved to Mobile; then I worked in Mobile.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: I worked on the court cases, worked with the U.S. Attorney's office in trying the court cases for two or three years from this office before I moved to Mobile.

Dr. Bolton: But essentially everything had been wrapped up except for the pending court cases.

Mr. Matkin: Yes.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. I remember also reading about some of the unique problems that you faced. One that was really fascinating was that you had to move grave sites out of this area. Maybe you could just tell us a little about that.

Mr. Matkin: There were two main cemeteries. The Gainesville cemetery, I don't recall the number of graves in that cemetery. Then there was one referred to as the Gainesville colored cemetery. Both associated with churches nearby. Then there were two other grave sites. Word got out that we were going to relocate these cemeteries and we had some awfully strange offers that walked into our office.

I recall one day two young men who said they had gotten off of a ship in New Orleans and had heard that we were paying an outlandish amount of money per hour for people to dig up these graves. But you had to go into quarantine and they were willing to do it. That was one of many such

inquiries we received about the relocation of these cemeteries.

Dr. Bolton: What do you mean they had to go into quarantine?

Mr. Matkin: They had heard that digging up these graves would expose the workers to some type of health hazard which would require them to be quarantined. This was just a rumor that had gotten started.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, this wasn't true.

Mr. Matkin: This was not true, correct.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, okay. [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: This was a rumor that was going around that we were paying an enormous amount of money per hour for gravediggers. You had to go into quarantine as long as you were working with these. You had to wear certain breathing apparatuses. None of which was true.

What actually happened was a man on our staff in the Bay St. Louis office worked solely on relocation of the grave sites. We had a survey party to go in there and identify and survey and mark on the map the exact location of every grave site in the cemetery. Those unmarked graves were identified by probes. We probed every square foot of that cemetery with a steel rod where there were no graves. By the density of the ground you could outline grave sites that were unmarked. Then we surveyed those locations and identified each site on the survey map.

Then we advertised for competitive bids for people who were in this business. And contracted with the contractor—I don't remember the name; he was out of Florida—to come in and relocate all these grave sites. Prior to entering into that contract, this man working on the Corps of Engineers staff had spent many, many months attempting to locate a next-of-kin.

Dr. Bolton: I bet that was difficult. [laughter]

Mr. Matkin: It was very difficult. Going through history archives, county records, church records, talking to people in the area. We attempted to identify a next-of-kin. Where we could find a next-of-kin, even if it was a great-great-great-grandchild, we gave preference to the requested relocation site of that next-of-kin. We got them to sign a document indicating the preferred re-interment site, and that's where we relocated them. Re-interred them.

Dr. Bolton: What about the people that you couldn't find a next-of-kin for?

Mr. Matkin: We obtained a court order and relocated those at various cemeteries in the general area. Those, by the way, are still on record and anyone that shows up—and I had through the years people who showed up and said, "Hey, I had a great-great-uncle who was buried out here in the Gainesville cemetery. What happened to him?" We could go to these records, and if it was a marked grave site, we could identify the exact grave site and where it was re-interred.

Dr. Bolton: I guess the unmarked ones, it's just a mystery about who's—

Mr. Matkin: The unmarked ones were a mystery. Some of them were identified. There was a lady who lived across the street from the cemetery. I don't remember her name other than she was locally

referred to [as] Aunt Blue Davis. She was elderly, I would think in her eighties, and she was familiar with that cemetery and worked with us a lot in identifying some of the sites and the next-of-kin. I recall that she said that she had been to just about every funeral in there since she was a little girl. And she was quite familiar with it.

We used local people to help identify unmarked graves as best we could, both in the Gainesville cemetery and the colored cemetery. Of course, some of the church records were a great help. We worked long and hard in trying to do a good job with relocating these. We contracted with a local minister to be present to maintain a sense of decorum during the process.

Dr. Bolton: Sure.

Mr. Matkin: At each disinterment and re-interment. And the family or next-of-kin was notified if they wanted to be present.

Dr. Bolton: Seems like you went to great lengths then.

Mr. Matkin: So it was. And it was a really solemn thing. Gee, I think we found marked grave sites with dates on them like 1815. We are talking about a hundred and what-seventy-five years or so.

Dr. Bolton: One question came to me while you were sitting there. It seems like you did a number of different things. How many people worked in this office out of Bay St. Louis, the Corps of Engineers office?

Mr. Matkin: We had, I think, at any given time maybe fifty, fifty-five people.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, really? Big operation.

Mr. Matkin: We had a planning and control section, people who did all the mapping and writing of the descriptions. They also handled all the financial work, monies coming in and going out and the record keeping. We had an appraisal section with qualified appraisers and support people who processed all appraisal work. The acquisition section which was a group of negotiators. A legal section with attorneys who handled legal matters such as preparation of deeds, closings, title work and such. Then subsequently—it was not applicable when we first started—we had people who handled the homeowners assistance program which were the relocation benefits that came along a little later.

Dr. Bolton: So you paid the landowner.

Mr. Matkin: Gave them some benefits to move, to help them defray the costs of moving and acquiring a new home when they relocated.

Dr. Bolton: No matter where they moved?

Mr. Matkin: No matter where.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. One other thing I remember about some of the unique problems that came up, I remember reading in Gainesville when half the people had left and there were still half the people there, they were having problems with robberies and vandalism.

Mr. Matkin: Vandalism.

Dr. Bolton: And they wanted the roads blocked off. Was that a big problem?

Mr. Matkin: Vandalism and stealing was a big problem. We would acquire a home and the people would move out. They would come back in a few days and find that some of the fixtures were gone. Waterwell pumps were a big item. Just unattended and people felt that they could help themselves, I guess.

Dr. Bolton: Did they ever find out if this was coming from the surrounding communities?

Mr. Matkin: Well, they increased the patrol, but who knows. Quite often, in the majority of the cases I would say, when we acquired a home, the owner would reserve the right to salvage the improvements and remove them from the site. The appraiser in preparing the appraisal at fair market value would also include an estimate of the salvage value of the improvements on that property. In other words, what would the improvements sell for if they were offered for sale for off-site removal. The landowner was given the opportunity to acquire them at that value. In most cases they accepted that. Now, they didn't have to move it themselves. They could turn around and sell it to somebody else for salvage. In a lot of cases they were moved intact. Houses jacked up and hauled down the highway. The landowners did a lot of the salvaging in a lot of cases.

Dr. Bolton: They could just sell the whole thing outright and then the building belonged to the government or they could sell it for salvage value.

Mr. Matkin: Or we would acquire it at fair market value and then say, "The salvage value on this house is three hundred and twenty-five dollars. If you want it you can have it at that price. But it has to be removed" and we set a time.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: And anything left on the premises after that date automatically becomes the property of the government.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. I know that there was some resistance; it's clear that some people did resist. But since you live on the Coast and you have been associated with this place for years, I was wondering what do you think has been the economic impact of the space center on South Mississippi in particular? Do you think people realize that it was worthwhile for them to give up their land, to move out?

Mr. Matkin: Oh, I'm sure you'd find a lot of them would agree with that and say yes. But you would also find some that still wish they were living right back here in Gainesville.

Dr. Bolton: Okay.

Mr. Matkin: And I can understand that too. I don't think there is any question that some of the people who left here are living in better conditions now than they were when they were living here. But that is not to say that this is what should happen to everybody. It's not. It is a traumatic experience. I've said it many times, I told a lot of landowners, "I may think I know how you feel by having to give up your home where you've lived, but I'll never know until they come to take mine.

Then I'll really know exactly how you feel." So far no one has had to come take mine.

Dr. Bolton: So you really don't. You mentioned that after you finished the job of acquiring the land and settling the court cases here, you went back to Mobile. Is that where you stayed the rest of your career?

Mr. Matkin: I went to Mobile in the Management and Disposal Branch of the Corps of Engineers which has to do with, just as the name implies, management and disposal of government-owned real estate. We act as agents in real estate matters for the Department of the Army and the Department of the Air Force and NASA. The Corps of Engineers, of course, has jurisdiction over a lot of lands. The waterways projects, the numerous lakes, the hydro-power projects, flood control and navigation projects. The Mobile district has the distinction of having the most-visited lake in the United States. Something over sixteen million visitors a year at Lake Sidney Lanier which is just above Atlanta. There are ten large marinas which are on sites leased through the Corps of Engineers for operation as privately owned marinas. My office handled that. Any leasing activity, any utility that wanted to cross military lands or NASA lands came through my office ultimately, and we would issue that instrument and administer it through its life.

Disposal of lands, any lands that became excess to government requirements, we handled the reporting to General Services Administration and that agency would make the ultimate disposal. So that's where I spent the last twenty-three years, since 1968 until May of 1991.

Dr. Bolton: But you still lived in Pass Christian. You commuted to Mobile.

Mr. Matkin: Right, right.

Dr. Bolton: Okay. Well, I've about exhausted the questions that I had, but I wanted to ask is there anything that I might have left out that you think is important or that you'd like to add? I might have missed something that I should have asked you.

Mr. Matkin: There are a lot of things that will come to mind I'm sure. [laughter] Of course, dealing with all these people, a lot of our landowners lived in New Orleans. We had several subdivisions in the buffer zone.

Dr. Bolton: People commuting to New Orleans?

Mr. Matkin: No, they owned the land over here, hoping someday to get out of the big city. There was Riverhills subdivision up on the north end, which was west of the highway, between the highway and the river. A lot of lots had sold, but few houses had been built in there. Down below there were Logtown Manor, one and two. A lot of lots sold, maybe a dozen houses built. I'm talking about hundreds of lots. Springwood Park, still in existence outside of the buffer zone. Part of it was in the buffer zone, part was out. We bought a lot of lots in there.

A lot of these people lived in New Orleans, and it was their dream to get out of the city. These were middle-class working people, wanting to get out of the city and have a place to go in the country. They bought these lots, maybe a hundred and twenty-five dollar lot. It was a twenty-five foot lot; they would have to buy four of them to have anything decent. So they maybe paid a hundred dollars down and maybe ten dollars a month for years to acquire a parcel of land that maybe someday they would build on. We had maybe two thousand owners who lived in New Orleans.

Dr. Bolton: That's interesting.

Mr. Matkin: Working people, you could not contact them during the day because you had to contact the man and his wife together. So we spent a lot of time between five o'clock in the afternoon and even into the morning. I had appointments in New Orleans at one o'clock in the morning at one time. We just had to take them anywhere we could get them. I would take a crew to New Orleans on Monday morning and we would come back Saturday afternoon. We'd spend the day trying to make appointments. Then when that five o'clock traffic would hit that is when we would hit the road trying to call on people and get as many as we could.

Dr. Bolton: I thought of another question. I know that Interstate 59 and 10 were being planned and constructed while this was going on. Were there people in the buffer zone that were maybe trying to hold out because they felt that their land would become a lot more valuable once the interstates went through? Did you run into that problem? Negotiating with people whose lands—

Mr. Matkin: No, I don't recall that that was a big problem.

Dr. Bolton: I know that was happening at the same time. I just thought that might have been-

Mr. Matkin: I don't recall that that was a big problem. Seemed like we had acquired a lot of that land and maybe conveyed some to the interstate.

Dr. Bolton: Oh, okay.

Mr. Matkin: Now, the railroad that came from Nicholson down to the test site here-

Dr. Bolton: Spur line?

Mr. Matkin: Spur line. We were competing with them there for awhile. They were arriving at the same values approximately as we were.

Dr. Bolton: Was there anything else that you'd like to add?

Mr. Matkin: I don't think of anything else right off the top.

Dr. Bolton: Well, thank you for coming out today and talking to us. I think it will be valuable.

Mr. Matkin: Well, I hope I've shed some light on how we went about our job. Sometimes we would say they could have somebody else out here acquiring these lands from these people. I always told them, "I'm going to tell you the truth as best I know it." So I got along with people very well. I think most of the negotiators did. But it's not a real happy experience to take somebody's home away from them. But it worked out and I think progress is inevitable.

Dr. Bolton: Well, thank you again.

Mr. Matkin: Thank you very much.